

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LAST LUMP OF COAL

It seemed certain that no bears were to be had; several seals were killed during the days of the 4th, 5th, and 6th of November; then the wind changed, and the thermometer went up several degrees; but the snow-drifts began again with great violence. It became impossible to leave the vessel, and the greatest precaution was needed to keep out the damp. At the end of the week there were several bushels of ice in the condensers. The weather changed again on the 15th of November, and the thermometer, under the influence of certain atmospherical conditions, went down to 24 degrees below zero. It was the lowest temperature observed up till then. This cold would have been bearable in a quiet atmosphere, but there was a strong wind which seemed to fill the atmosphere with sharp blades. The doctor was vexed at being kept prisoner, for the ground was covered with snow, made hard by the wind, and was easy to walk upon; he wanted to attempt some long excursion.

It is very difficult to work when it is so cold, because of the shortness of breath it causes. A man can only do a quarter of his accustomed work; iron implements become impossible to touch; if one is taken up without precaution, it causes a pain as bad as a burn, and pieces of skin are left on it. The crew, confined to the ship, were obliged to walk for two hours on the covered deck, where they

were allowed to smoke, which was not allowed in the common room. There, directly the fire got low, the ice invaded the walls and the joints in the flooring; every bolt, nail, or metal plate became immediately covered with a layer of ice. The doctor was amazed at the instantaneity of the phenomenon. The breath of the men condensed in the air, and passing quickly from a fluid to a solid state, fell round them in snow. At a few feet only from the stoves the cold was intense, and the men stood near the fire in a compact group. The doctor advised them to accustom their skin to the temperature, which would certainly get worse, and he himself set the example; but most of them were too idle or too benumbed to follow his advice, and preferred remaining in the unhealthy heat. However, according to the doctor, there was no danger in the abrupt changes of temperature in going from the warm room into the cold. It is only dangerous for people in perspiration; but the doctor's lessons were thrown away on the greater part of the crew.

As to Hatteras, he did not seem to feel the influence of the temperature. He walked silently about at his ordinary pace. Had the cold no empire over his strong constitution, or did he possess in a supreme degree the natural heat he wished his sailors to have? Was he so armed in his one idea as to be insensible to exterior impressions? His men were profoundly astonished at seeing him facing the 24 degrees below zero; he left the ship for hours, and came back without his face betraying the slightest mark of cold.

"He is a strange man," said the doctor to Johnson; "he even astonishes

me. He is one of the most powerful natures I have ever studied in my life."

"The fact is," answered Johnson, "that he comes and goes in the open air without clothing himself more warmly than in the month of June."

"Oh! the question of clothes is not of much consequence," replied the doctor; "it is of no use clothing people who do not produce heat naturally. It is the same as if we tried to warm a piece of ice by wrapping it up in a blanket! Hatteras does not want that; he is constituted so, and I should not be surprised if being by his side were as good as being beside a stove."

Johnson had the job of clearing the water-hole the next day, and remarked that the ice was more than ten feet thick. The doctor could observe magnificent aurora borealis almost every night; from four till eight p.m. the sky became slightly coloured in the north; then this colouring took the regular form of a pale yellow border, whose extremities seemed to buttress on to the ice-field. Little by little the brilliant zone rose in the sky, following the magnetic meridian, and appeared striated with blackish bands; jets of some luminous matter, augmenting and diminishing, shot out lengthways; the meteor, arrived at its zenith, was often composed of several bows, bathed in floods of red, yellow, or green light. It was a dazzling spectacle. Soon the different curves all joined in one point, and formed boreal crowns of a heavenly richness. At last the bows joined, the splendid aurora faded, the intense rays melted into pale, vague, undetermined

shades, and the marvellous phenomenon, feeble, and almost extinguished, fainted insensibly into the dark southern clouds. Nothing can equal the wonders of such a spectacle under the high latitudes less than eight degrees from the Pole; the aurora borealis perceived in temperate regions gives no idea of them--not even a feeble one; it seems as if Providence wished to reserve its most astonishing marvels for these climates.

During the duration of the moon several images of her are seen in the sky, increasing her brilliancy; often simple lunar halos surround her, and she shines from the centre of her luminous circle with a splendid intensity.

On the 26th of November there was a high tide, and the water escaped with violence from the water-hole; the thick layer of ice was shaken by the rising of the sea, and sinister crackings announced the submarine struggle; happily the ship kept firm in her bed, and her chains only were disturbed. Hatteras had had them fastened in anticipation of the event. The following days were still colder; there was a penetrating fog, and the wind scattered the piled-up snow; it became difficult to see whether the whirlwinds began in the air or on the ice-fields; confusion reigned.

The crew were occupied in different works on board, the principal of which consisted in preparing the grease and oil produced by the seals; they had become blocks of ice, which had to be broken with axes into little bits, and ten barrels were thus preserved.

All sorts of vessels were useless, and the liquid they contained would only have broken them when the temperature changed. On the 28th the thermometer went down to 32 degrees below zero; there was only coal enough left for ten days, and everyone looked forward to its disappearance with dread. Hatteras had the poop stove put out for economy's sake, and from that time Shandon, the doctor, and he stayed in the common room. Hatteras was thus brought into closer contact with the men, who threw ferocious and stupefied looks at him. He heard their reproaches, their recriminations, and even their threats, and he could not punish them. But he seemed to be deaf to everything. He did not claim the place nearest the fire, but stopped in a corner, his arms folded, never speaking.

In spite of the doctor's recommendations, Pen and his friends refused to take the least exercise; they passed whole days leaning against the stove or lying under the blankets of their hammocks. Their health soon began to suffer; they could not bear up against the fatal influence of the climate, and the terrible scurvy made its appearance on board. The doctor had, however, begun, some time ago, to distribute limejuice and lime pastilles every morning; but these preservatives, generally so efficacious, had very little effect on the malady, which soon presented the most horrible symptoms. The sight of the poor fellows, whose nerves and muscles contracted with pain, was pitiable. Their legs swelled in an extraordinary fashion, and were covered with large blackish blue spots; their bloody gums and ulcerated lips only gave passage to inarticulate sounds; the vitiated blood no longer

went to the extremities.

Clifton was the first attacked; then Gripper, Brunton, and Strong took to their hammocks. Those that the malady still spared could not lose sight of their sufferings; they were obliged to stay there, and it was soon transformed into a hospital, for out of eighteen sailors of the Forward, thirteen were attacked in a few days. Pen seemed destined to escape contagion; his vigorous nature preserved him from it. Shandon felt the first symptoms, but they did not go further, and exercise kept the two in pretty good health.

The doctor nursed the invalids with the greatest care, and it made him miserable to see the sufferings he could not alleviate. He did all he could to keep his companions in good spirits; he talked to them, read to them, and told them tales, which his astonishing memory made it easy for him to do. He was often interrupted by the complaints and groans of the invalids, and he stopped his talk to become once more the attentive and devoted doctor. His health kept up well; he did not get thinner, and he used to say that it was a good thing for him that he was dressed like a seal or a whale, who, thanks to its thick layer of fat, easily supports the Arctic atmosphere. Hatteras felt nothing, either physically or morally. Even the sufferings of his crew did not seem to touch him. Perhaps it was because he would not let his face betray his emotions; but an attentive observer would have remarked that a man's heart beat beneath the iron envelope. The doctor analysed him, studied him, but did not succeed in classifying so strange an organisation, a temperament so supernatural. The

thermometer lowered again; the walk on deck was deserted; the Esquimaux dogs alone frequented it, howling lamentably.

There was always one man on guard near the stove to keep up the fire; it was important not to let it go out. As soon as the fire got lower, the cold glided into the room; ice covered the walls, and the humidity, rapidly condensed, fell in snow on the unfortunate inhabitants of the brig. It was in the midst of these unutterable tortures that the 8th of December was reached. That morning the doctor went as usual to consult the exterior thermometer. He found the mercury completely frozen.

"Forty-four degrees below zero!" he cried with terror. And that day they threw the last lump of coal into the stove.